

All Saints Talk for 17 March 2024

Paddy Gleave

God's Questions: Do you believe this?

Jesus comforts Martha. John 11 vs 17 – 27

We are in a sermon series where God asks us questions – what a great series!

I am a star trek fan and in the late 1990s a film came out with Captain Picard. In the film Captain Picard receives devastating news. We don't know what it is. Another character addresses him, saying,

“They say that time is the fire in which we burn”
(which is a quote from a poem By Delmore Schwartz).

It's a haunting line – expressing, like all good poetry, a deep human truth that we are all decaying, aging and will die. Humans have responded to this in all different ways. In the West I think there is denial about death – with the elevation of youth and billion pound industries of products and services sold to ward off death.

We look to find meaning in the shadow of this truth. Recent Disney films inculcate the idea that we need to find the truth within and self actualise that in terms of gaining control of our life and forging our destiny. Other stories are more cynical.

Here is a picture from another film which was influential on my Generation in the 1990s based on a book. Here are some famous lines

“Choose Life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a big television, choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players and electrical tin openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol, and dental insurance. Choose fixed interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. Choose a three-piece suit on hire purchase in a range of fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who you are on Sunday morning. Choose your future. Choose life... But why would I want to do a thing like that? I chose not to choose life. I chose somethin' else.”

The protagonists, a group of young men, reacted against the life set before them and ended up the dark world of drug addiction and destructive behaviours. I think the film resonated with my generation as a reaction against the materialistic 1980s and our parents – and looking to finding meaning, purpose and more authentic life.

So, today's question from God is all about life and death and the big questions we face as humans – the brutal reality of death and what is the purpose of life as a result? This chapter in John is about this. So, today we are today going to face this and listen to the question that Jesus asks Martha and is asking us today.

We have all experienced death in one way or other. Here are some quotes from C S Lewis from a Grief Observed (which incidentally he first published under a pseudonym)

"Is anything more certain than that in all those vast times and spaces, if I were allowed to search them, I should nowhere find her face, her voice, her touch? She died. She is dead. Is the word so difficult to learn?"¹

We experience death because of the brokenness of our world and ourselves – right back into Genesis 1 – 3 where humans take from the tree of good and evil – and look to define good and evil on their own terms and not from God. So, they were banished from access to the tree of life.

This passage is the culmination of Jesus over the preceding chapters saying things about himself using symbols and metaphors. He pulls on Old Testament ideas by describing himself as the bread of life, light of the world, good shepherd and the water of life using I AM statements – so purposively putting us back into the story of the burning bush where God described himself to Moses as “I am who I am”. In this passage, he goes one step further and claims a category for himself which dramatically up the stakes and should shake us to the core if we put our faith in it.

Jesus has some dear friends – Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

I love maps so here is one showing where Bethany is which is where Mary, Martha and Lazarus live. It's a couple of miles from Jerusalem.

Lazarus is sick, his sisters Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus who was in Jerusalem asking him to come but by the time he arrives Lazarus is dead. Martha as the eldest sister goes out to meet.

We have met Martha before in other gospel stories – Jesus affirmed in front of the male disciples that it was right for Mary (her sister) to sit at his feet and learn from him. Martha says to Jesus that he could have healed Lazarus but now he is dead.

We see in verse 21 the Martha in her grief is aware of the mighty deeds that Jesus can do and his relationship with God the father. She has faith and confidence in Jesus even in her grief and the brutal rawness of death but I don't think at this stage she thought Jesus could do anything further for Lazarus.

There then follows an interesting exchange that I think it would help to give a little of the back story too.

The Jewish faith in the time of Jesus was not uniform in its beliefs. There were a number of groups holding different views about what happened when a person dies. The early parts of the Old Testament are a bit hazy about what happened when a person died. It mentions She-ol. A place where the dead went but without bodies – a sort of half life and a bit gloomy! Death began to be seen as frustrating God's plan for people and creation and in particular God's love for people – death severed the relationship with God. Something needed to be done to get the project back on track – and the prophets talked about a new heavens and new earth, The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection. The pharisees who you may have heard did believe in the resurrection where people would be resurrected into new bodies in the new heaven and earth.

In verse 23 Jesus said to Martha that Lazarus will rise again. Martha thought he was talking about this belief in the resurrection and the new heavens and new earth. Jesus has elsewhere in the Gospel story affirmed that belief so Martha's response is understandable.

However, while Jesus was affirming the heavens and earth he meant more when he said Lazarus would rise and now reveals an earth shaking truth to Martha.

Jesus does not say that he can provide resurrection (although that is implicit). Instead, he said that he is the resurrection and life. That he effectively is life and has authority over death itself – he is activating one of the deepest ideas in the Old Testament – that he is the creator – the source of all life in this existence. Jesus then asks Martha the question which is also one addressed to everyone – “Do you believe this?)

In acknowledging this – Martha’s mind shifts in revelation – if Jesus is the resurrection and the life then he must be the King – the messiah, the anointed one – the son of God. The coming together of all that the Old Testament pointed too, the resolution of the plot tension – that humans need to be rescued by the one true human – the embodiment of God in human form.

The part of John also foreshadows how Jesus is going to go about being the resurrection and the life in facing down death and the human kingdoms which use death to destroy and oppress.

He takes risks and goes to places where his life is under threat (the disciples told him not to go to Bethany because people were threatening to stone him). He goes to a tomb where a stone has been rolled across the entrance. He commands the stone to be rolled away, he then calls out in a loud voice and Lazarus emerges with grave clothes on him.

Come now friends, crying out in a loud voice, a tomb and stone being rolled away, mention of grave clothes and Lazarus being returned to life – this foreshadows what Jesus is going to do for all of us. His going to the place of his enemies knowing he is going to his death, dying on a cross or a tree for us, being buried in a tomb and rising to life so that we can now be in right relationship with God and like Lazarus be connected to life – the ultimate tree of life.

SO, living a life in association with Jesus and acknowledging him as the true King over all Kings we participate in the confidence and power over death that Jesus had then and has now. We can hang on to this in the dark, brutal rawness of grief and also when we think about our own life.

Going back to Captain Picard in response to saying time is the fire in which we burn he says he will cherish each moment of life because they will not come again. However, the reality of Jesus challenges Captain Picard. Even though our bodies decay and age we are enclosed by Jesus and he releases us from the finality and grip of death because beyond death is the undiscovered country of Jesus. Death loses its potency or its sting to quote Paul,

“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”

This is not just for the new heavens and earth. The new creation and life of Jesus broke into this universe on Easter Day. Jesus can bring new life into the here and now as a foretaste of what it to come. Perhaps you need to feel some of Jesus’s life in your being today – to have some life bought to places that are dead – relationships, jadedness, sadness or healing.

And in embracing Jesus now and his life we start to change, In the film *Trainspotting* the character tried to find meaning in drug taking and we can look for life in the wrong places. Perhaps we do yearn for the big television, the three piece suite, the career. In a way these things can be deathly, capturing our minds to find meaning and self worth in the acquisition of things and status. This is not the life that Jesus offers. It is upside down – a rejection of chasing status, a rejection of finding security and self sufficiency in money and possession. It’s radical, its edgy. I think we all need to be challenged on this as so much of who we are comes from our culture – with its emphasis on power, self reliance, wealth and gratification.

So, perhaps you don’t know Jesus – this is the time where you can meet him, the true Lord, the tree of life the creator. This could be your time to meet him and be clothed in a new life.

Perhaps you do know Jesus but you want to feel his life afresh and have a new sense of the big story that you are part of as Jesus envelops you. Perhaps part of your life feel deathly and need his life giving touch.

Perhaps we have looked for life in the wrong places. Let ourselves find meaning, confidence and purpose in things or in status. You might want to ask Jesus to reveal areas of your life that he wants to transform and make new.

Perhaps, you feel simply feel lost and need to simply hide in the tree of life with Jesus.

So, to finish.

I chose not to choose the life the world holds out to me. I chose the life that comes from the creator. The life that comes as the still small voice in the storm, the life which is built on the solid rock foundation of the way of Jesus, choosing a life which is radical challenging everything that I am. I chose to come down from the sycamore tree and be challenged by Jesus about my resources, I chose to enter into the bizarre world where all my learning, knowledge and experience are turned upside down by Jesus saying I must come to him like a child.

So, choose life – Jesus – the I AM and then find out that it's not really about you choosing Jesus it's about Jesus and you choosing each other as you dance to a new melody that is pregnant with the new life to come whilst his life resonates through your very bones into the now.